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SUBJECT: DAS Kramer Discusses Elections with Milinkevich
Campaign Team

Reftels: A) Minsk 0200 B) 05 Minsk 1495 C) Minsk 0184

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 24, EUR DAS David Kramer met with deputy campaign managers of the single opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign team Victor Korneyenko and Aleksandr Dobrovolsky. Korneyenko confirmed Milinkevich's plan to hold a rally on March 2, the same day as President Lukashenko's Third All-Belarusian Assembly, and laid out the plans for supporters to defend their vote on Election Day. Korneyenko and Dobrovolsky discussed the campaign's progress, noting Milinkevich's high name recognition, as well as commenting on Milinkevich's and Kozulin's February 22 appearances on state television. Korneyenko relayed Milinkevich's major complaints with the campaign process thus far, including the population's lack of awareness about the upcoming elections, the skewed coverage of the candidates in the state press, the Central Election Committee's decision not to force Lukashenko to take a leave of absence during the campaign, and the low number of opposition members represented on the precinct election commissions. Korneyenko defended Milinkevich's foreign travel, including Korneyenko's recent trip to Moscow, when Kramer commented that Milinkevich's voters are in Belarus. Finally, Kramer reiterated U.S. interest in Belarus, stressed the united U.S. and EU position on the elections and pledged U.S. engagement with Belarusian society regardless of the outcome of the elections. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 24, EUR DAS David Kramer, accompanied by Ambassador and Embassy notetakers, met with deputy campaign managers Victor Korneyenko and Aleksandr Dobrovolsky for 10 Plus Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign team. At the time of the meeting, Milinkevich was in the northern part of the country on a campaign trip and campaign manager Sergei Kalyakin was in Prague for the PACE conference to discuss the situation in Belarus.

Milinkevich Plans Rally, Expects Problems

¶3. (C) Korneyenko confirmed that Milinkevich planned to hold a rally in Freedom Square on March 2, the same day as the Third All-Belarus Assembly (septel). [Note: Freedom

Square is located near the site of the Third All-Belarus Assembly.] Korneyenko hoped to have 10,000-15,000 supporters at the rally, but expects that law enforcement officials will take measures to decrease that number. [Note: Post estimated that 2,000-3,000 people participated in the event, while Milinkevich campaign team activists and ODIHR observers believed there were 5,000 supporters present.]

¶4. (C) Stressing that he was passing this message to all parties, Kramer strongly underscored the importance of the elections being concluded without any resort to force or violence. He noted this message was mainly directed to the Belarusian authorities, which should abide by its OSCE obligations and allow people to peacefully protest. However, Kramer reminded the campaign team that if they do decide to conduct protests, they should be peaceful and non-provocative.

¶5. (C) Korneyenko promised that they would try to demonstrate peacefully, but also mentioned that it may not be possible. Korneyenko fears that a violent or drunken "protester" will be planted in the demonstration to start a riot, giving the GOB the opportunity to respond with force.

Election Day Plans: Supporters to Flock to Polling Stations

¶6. (C) Korneyenko said that the Milinkevich campaign team is encouraging Milinkevich supporters to go to their local polling stations at 8 p.m. on Election Day. The team thinks this will help prove the results of the elections were falsified by showing the true number of people who voted for Milinkevich. [Note: Previous plans from the

Milinkevich team included calling on Milinkevich supporters to gather in Minsk around 10:00 p.m. following the mini-protests at the polling stations, but Korneyenko did not mention this idea to Kramer. Perhaps the team views such a strategy as unrealistic, given the GOB pressures faced by Milinkevich supporters on February 17, when trying to gather in Minsk for the candidate registration ceremony.]

¶7. (C) Korneyenko said that the government is gearing up to face protests on and after Election Day. Korneyenko fears that the GOB will impose strict restrictions on transportation, including ordering trains or subway trains to pass through stations in Minsk without stopping. Korneyenko expects that the GOB will close the center of town in addition to the campaign headquarters of the opposition.

Assessment of the Candidates' Television Performances

¶8. (C) When Kramer asked what the campaign team thought about Kozulin's television appearance, Korneyenko replied that the text of Kozulin's speech was brazen (ref A). [Note: Kozulin aired Lukashenko's dirty laundry and made bold accusations about the sitting president, including that he has an illegitimate child and a mistress.] Ambassador commented that Kozulin reminded him of Lukashenko during his first presidential campaign in 1994. While Korneyenko admitted that Kozulin's style might appeal to some, Korneyenko claimed that most people do not believe or trust Kozulin.

¶9. (C) When Kramer asked about Milinkevich's performance, Korneyenko responded that Milinkevich talked about important concepts but admitted that Milinkevich's speech lacked energy. Korneyenko explained that Milinkevich was nervous because he did not have much time to review the information that his campaign team prepared for him. Despite the 10 Plus Coalition candidate's lackluster performance, Korneyenko claimed that the people still liked Milinkevich.

¶10. (C) Kramer responded that the U.S. has been impressed

with Milinkevich's rise, but also stressed that the U.S. supports a democratic process of free and fair elections and not any one candidate.

Milinkevich's Numbers Are Good, But He Needs More Time

¶11. (C) Korneyenko said that Milinkevich is doing well in the polls. Korneyenko reported that Milinkevich's name recognition is at 60 percent according to Gallup polls. In Minsk, Lukashenko and Milinkevich's numbers are close; Lukashenko is polling at 33.5 percent and Milinkevich is not far behind at 27.5 percent. [Note: Milinkevich's positive numbers result from a poll that relies on name recognition, not name recall. Since Milinkevich's name recognition is high, the results might be slightly inflated.] In the rural areas, however, Lukashenko leads at 69.5 percent compared to Milinkevich's 12.5 percent. Korneyenko reported that Kozulin's numbers were in the low single digits. Korneyenko said that Milinkevich's polling numbers exploded early and Korneyenko and Dobrovolsky agreed that Milinkevich needs more time to win this election. Regardless of the result of the elections, Korneyenko said the 10 Plus Coalition will not go back over the campaign and point fingers at who is to blame. Instead, they will try to remain united after the elections.

Campaign Team's Major Complaints

¶12. (C) Korneyenko reported that they are not very happy with the way the campaign has proceeded. The campaign headquarters had originally wanted 10,000 volunteers working during the nomination phase to collect signatures, but were only able to get 3,000 (ref B). Korneyenko made repeated comments that Kozulin's team had more resources, which makes it difficult for Milinkevich's team to

negotiate with Kozulin even if Milinkevich's team does have better ideas.

¶13. (C) Kramer asked what points of concern should he raise in his meeting later that day with the Central Election Committee (CEC). Korneyenko immediately responded that Kramer should ask why the CEC insists on a passive, almost uneventful campaign. Korneyenko expressed his incredulity about the low-level of awareness among the population about the upcoming elections. He noted that the elections are three weeks away and there are few signs in Minsk that there is a campaign going on. He also explained that volunteers are not able to campaign effectively because local government authorities, who control where candidates can gather and distribute information, assign the opposition volunteers such obscure places to speak or distribute information that the information is not reaching the people. Finally, Korneyenko complained about the time the campaign team lost in the two weeks of dead time from when the candidates submitted their nomination signatures until they received their candidate registrations.

¶14. (C) Korneyenko went on to complain about the state press' coverage of the elections. He said that Lukashenko receives hours of positive coverage in the state media every week (ref C), while the little coverage that the opposition gets is negative or neutral at best. Dobrovolsky also added that access to the press is another main problem. Dobrovolsky pointed out that candidates cannot publish their platforms in the independent press because it violates election laws as "illegal campaign financing." Dobrovolsky also mentioned that the time slots for the pre-recorded television segments were ineffective since they broadcast during rush hour when most people are not in front of a television.

¶15. (C) Korneyenko also noted that Lukashenko has not taken a leave of absence, as he is required according to Article

77 of the Election Code. The rule states that any candidate campaigning for President must take a leave of absence from work after being registered. The law specifies, however, that presidential incumbents seeking a second term are exempt from the rule. Korneyenko complained that Lukashenko is seeking a third term, not a second, and therefore he should be required to take a leave of absence. Korneyenko claimed that CEC head Lidya Yermoshina's response to these allegations was that the Election Code has not been updated to reflect the November referendum, which allows a President to run for a third term. Yermoshina continued that while the law specifically mentions a second term and not a third, the "spirit of the law" implies that Lukashenko does not have to take a leave of absence. [Note: This position contradicts Yermoshina's and the CEC's prior rulings where they have closely followed the letter of a law, and not its spirit.]

¶16. (C) Korneyenko also asked Kramer to raise the issue of skewed representation on the precinct electoral commissions where only one out of 74,000 commission workers was a member of an opposition party.

Campaign Team Defends Milinkevich's Foreign Travel

¶17. (C) Kramer said that the West is impressed with Milinkevich's rise and the impression that he has made abroad, but reminded him that people outside of Belarus cannot vote in the upcoming elections. Kramer encouraged the campaign team to focus Milinkevich's efforts on Belarus. Korneyenko stated that Milinkevich's trips abroad helped him gather support from Belarusians as well. According to Korneyenko, millions of Belarusians saw Euronews' coverage of Milinkevich's European visit, which helped present a favorable image of Milinkevich as a candidate who can meet and converse comfortably with foreign leaders.

QRussian Analysts Wash Their Hands of Milinkevich

¶18. (C) Korneyenko just returned from Moscow where he met mainly with analysts, including Vladimir Ryzhkov, Slava Nikinov, Sergei Karaganov and Nikita Belykh, at a conference entitled "Belarus: The Apple of Contention Between Russia and the West." Korneyenko said that Russia is trying to make Belarus a point of contention between Russia and the West, forcing Belarus to choose. Milinkevich's campaign team tried to persuade the participants that Belarus does not have to choose, but can work with both. Korneyenko reported that the analysts already have their minds made up about the elections in Belarus; they have little information and they will not get any more. According to Korneyenko, Karaganov and Nikinov have "reliable sources" in Belarus telling them 90 percent of the population support Lukashenko.

Kramer Reaffirms U.S. Long-term Commitment to Belarus

¶19. (C) Kramer stressed to the members of the campaign team that the EU and the United States are very interested in Belarus and remain united on the elections in Belarus. Kramer renewed U.S. commitment to Belarus and pledged that whatever the outcome of the elections, the U.S. will continue to engage Belarusian civil society and political opposition.

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